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Suffering as a Gift: Compassion in the Fourteenth Dalai Lama

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I. The standpoint of the Dalai Lama and his perspectives on modern society

As we know, the fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet is one of the most famous spiritual leaders.

The Dalai Lama has three approaches when he addresses people. First, as a Tibetan, and particularly as the Dalai Lama, he talks about Tibet, Tibetan people, and the Tibetan culture whenever anyone shows some interest in these matters. Second, as a Buddhist monk, he tries to contribute what he can toward better harmony and understanding between different religions. Third, as a human being, he talks about what he terms Universal Responsibility which is the responsibility all of us have for each other, for all sentient beings, and for all of Nature. [Dalai Lama 2005(1990): 219-220]

The second approach shows his stand point of religious pluralism.

“All religions teach the virtues of love, altruism and patience, although they may be at variance in philosophical and ideological terms. We should therefore respect all religions. Every religious faith has made significant contributions to humanity for centuries in the past. In the future also, religious traditions will help us to promote peace in our own respective communities or at least to bring harmony and understanding between neighbors.”¹ [Dalai Lama 2005c: 21]

This is different from the model described by John Hick. Hick’s religious pluralism model is like that various different ways reach the same mountain top. On the contrary, the

¹ *chos lugs 'dra min bar lta ba'i rnam gzhag khyad par chen po yod kyang// byams brtse dang gzhan phan/ bzod sgom bya rgyu 'di chos lugs tshang ma gcig gyur gyis gsungs kyi yod stabs chos lugs tshang mar gus brtsi zhu dgos/ lo ngo brgya phrag mang po'i ring chos lugs 'dra min khag gis 'gro ba mi'i spyi tshogs la phan thogs kyi zhabs 'deg chen po bsgrubs yod/ ma 'ongs par yang che sa nas bshad na rang nyid gnas sa'i spyi tshogs la zhi bde yod pa zhig dang/ chung sa nas bshad na grong pa khyim mtshes bar mdza' mthun gyi 'brel ba yag po yong rgyur phan thogs yong rgyu yin/ [Dalai lama 2001: 35]*

Dalai Lama says as follow.

“To my way of thinking, the diversity that exists among the various religious traditions is enormously enriching. There is thus no need to try to find ways of saying that ultimately all religions are the same. They are similar in that they all emphasize the indispensability of love and compassion in the context of ethical discipline. But to say this is not to say that they are all essentially one.” [Dalai Lama 1999: 227] “Some people, it is true, hold that the Buddhist concept of *sunyata*, or emptiness, is ultimately the same as certain approaches to understanding the concept of God. Nevertheless, there remain difficulties with this. ... As an old Tibetan saying goes, we must beware of trying to put a yak’s head on a sheep’s body—or vice versa.” [Dalai Lama 1999: 228]

To understanding the Dalai Lama’s perspective of religion as this, we need to refer to his explanation about the difference between religion and spirituality.

“Actually, I believe there is an important distinction to be made between religion and spirituality. Religion I take to be concerned with faith in the claims to salvation of one faith tradition or another, an aspect of which is acceptance of some form of metaphysical or supernatural reality, including perhaps an idea of heaven or *nirvana*. Connected with this are religious teaching or dogma, ritual, prayer, and so on. Spirituality I take to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit—such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony—which bring happiness to both self and others. While ritual and prayer, along with the questions of *nirvana* and salvation, are directly connected to religious faith, these inner qualities need not be, however. There is thus no reason why the individual should not develop them, even to high degree, without recourse to any religious or metaphysical belief system. This is why I sometimes say that religion is something we can perhaps do without. What we cannot do without are these basic spiritual qualities. ... The unifying characteristic of the qualities I have described as ‘spiritual’ may be said to be speak of *shen pen kyi sem* meaning ‘the thought to be of help to others’.” [Dalai Lama 1999: 22-23]

The relationship between spirituality and religion in the Dalai Lama can be compared to the relationship between water and a tool for drinking water. We cannot alive without water. The ways of drinking water are various. One may use a cup, The other may use a ladle. Water is essential for us, however, tools are not necessarily essential. Without a cup, we can drink water by hands.

When the Dalai Lama addresses people (especially non Buddhist or non religious people), his religious perspective is base for his third stand point as human being.

One of his many works, titled *Ethics for the new millennium*, is written from his point of view as a human being. In this work, the Dalai Lama discusses the problems on modern society.

“We have, in my view, created a society in which people find it harder and harder to show one another basic affection. In place of the sense of community and belonging, which we find such a reassuring feature of less wealthy (and generally rural) societies, we find a high degree of loneliness and alienation.” [Dalai Lama 1999: 7-8]

It has been pointed out by some scholars that loneliness and alienation are important elements of modern society, which promote individualization. For example, according to Erich Fromm, “modern man’s feeling of isolation and powerlessness is increased still further by the character which all his human relationships have assumed. The concrete relationship of one individual to another has lost its direct and human character and has assumed a spirit of manipulation and instrumentality. In all social and personal relations the laws of the market are the rule. It is obvious that the relationship between competitors has to be based on mutual human indifference.” [Fromm 1994(1941): 118-119]

“The relationship between employer and employee is permeated by the same spirit of indifference.... They both use each other for the pursuit of their economic interest, their relationship is one in which both are means to an end, both are instrumental to each other. It is not a relationship of two human beings who have any interest in the other outside of this mutual usefulness. Not only the economic, but also the personal relations between men have this character of alienation, instead of relation between human beings, they assume the character of relations between things.” [Fromm 1994(1941): 118-119]

This suggestion by Fromm, recalls the words of the Dalai Lama, who says that while we might say, “I love my house” or “I have strong feelings of affection for this place,” we cannot say, “I have compassion” for these things. As they have no feelings, we cannot empathize with objects. We cannot, therefore, speak of having compassion for them. [Dalai Lama 1999: 74]

II. The character of suffering

The Dalai Lama suggests the answer to such problems which is based on mutual

indifference and relationships between human beings when they think of each other as things. According to him, approaching others with the thought of compassion in our mind is the best way to overcome feelings of isolation and loneliness. [Dalai Lama 1999 (1998): 53] When the Dalai Lama says that we can overcome feelings of isolation and loneliness through compassion, he is of course stating this point not as a Buddhist monk, or a Tibetan, but as a human being.

According to the Dalai Lama, the definition of compassion is “the wish that sentient beings may be free from suffering and the causes of suffering”², and his definition of sentient beings is “one which has the capacity to experience pain and suffering.” [Dalai Lama 1999: 133]

From the above, we can understand that one of the most important concepts for understanding compassion is suffering. Thus, what role does suffering play in compassion? How does suffering connect us to others? To answer this question, we need to examine the character of suffering.

In the works of the Dalai Lama, suffering is explained from various viewpoints:

“There are the avoidable forms which arise as a consequence of such phenomena as war, poverty, violence, crime—even things like illiteracy and certain diseases. Then there are the unavoidable forms which include such phenomena as the problems of sickness, old age, and death.” [Dalai Lama 1999: 133-134]

“It is possible to divide every kind of happiness and suffering into two main categories: mental and physical.” [Dalai Lama 2003: 18]

From the Buddhist viewpoint, suffering has three levels. The first level includes the obvious physical and mental sensations of pain and discomfort that we can all easily identify as suffering. The second level is the suffering caused by change. Although certain experiences or sensations may seem pleasurable and desirable now, inherent within them is the potential that they may culminate in an unsatisfactory experience. The third level of suffering is the pervasive suffering of conditioning. This refers to the very fact of our unenlightened existence, the fact that we are ruled by negative emotions and their underlying root causes, namely our own fundamental ignorance of the nature of reality.³

² *sems can de dag sdug bsngal dang/ de'i rgyu mtha' dag las bral bar 'dod pa/* [Dalai Lama 2005(1996): 51]

³ *sdug bsngal la spyir btang sdug bsngal gyi sdug bsngal/ 'gyur ba'i sdug bsngal/ khyab pa 'du byed kyi sdug bsngal bcas rigs gsum yod/ sdug bsngal gyi sdug bsngal ni mgo nad lta bu nga tshos dus rgyun du ngos 'dzin byed rgyu'i lus sems kyi sdug bsngal rnams yin/...rim pa gnyis pa 'gyur ba'i sdug bsngal ni/*

[Dalai Lama 2005a: 49-51]

Although suffering can be variously categorized, the following words of the Dalai Lama suggest the comprehensive character of suffering:

“Suffering is what we don’t want, and happiness is what we want. Therefore, we should achieve happiness and overcome suffering. Such happiness and suffering are experience. Experience is consciousness.Happiness and suffering are feeling and experience.”⁴

[Dalai Lama 2008(2007): 140]

“Any experience of consciousness—from the most mundane to the most elevated—has a certain coherence and, at the same time, a high degree of privacy, which means that it always exists from a particular point of view. The experience of consciousness is entirely subjective.” [Dalai Lama 2005b: 119]

Thus, suffering entails a high degree of privacy and is entirely subjective. Therefore, for the one who suffers, his/her suffering belongs to him/herself alone, and his/her suffering itself is never known to others. Therefore, we may be able to say that suffering separates one from others.

III. The character of compassion

However, one can see that others may be suffering because of his/her state or situation. At that time, one can have compassion. Hence, suffering is a key to open a connection with others.

As has been mentioned, compassion is defined that “the wish that sentient beings may be free from suffering and the cause of suffering.”⁵ [Dalai Lama 2005(1996): 51]

Here, we can consider how to wish that sentient beings may be free from suffering.

Hence, it is necessary to envisage another definition of compassion. According to the Dalai Lama, “At a basic level, compassion (*snying rje*)⁶ is understood mainly in terms of

ngo tshos phyi tshul du bde bar ngos 'dzin byed kyang/ der zhib 'jug byas na/ don dngos po'i ngas tshod la sdug bsngal zhig tu gyur yod pa rnam yin/...sdug bsngal gyi rim pa gsum pas dang po gnyis kyi gzhi byed la de'i mtshan gzhi ni/ nga tsho'i rgyud kyi zag bcas kyi lus sems kyi phung po gnyis yin/ de 'khor ba pa'i rigs thams cad la khyab pa'm 'jig par byed pas na khyab pa dang/ de nyid da lta'i sdug bsngal gyi gzhi dang/ ma 'ongs par sdug bsngal skied par byed pa'i cha nas 'du byed pa yin pas de la khyab pa 'du byed kyi sdug bsngal zhes brjod/[Dalai Lama 2005(1996): 28-29]

⁴ *sdug bsngal mi 'dod pa dang bde ba 'dod pa yin stabs bde bas grub rgyu dang sdug bsngal sel ba'i bde sdug gnyi po de myong ba red/ myong ba shes pa red/bde sdug tshor ba red/ myong ba red/ [Dalai Lama 2008(2007): 140]*

⁵ *sems can de dag sdug bsngal dang/ de'i rgyu mtha' dag las bral bar 'dod pa/ [Dalai Lama 2005(1996): 51]*

⁶ According to the Dalai Lama, although *snying rje* (compassion) is understood as an emotion, it belongs

empathy——our ability to enter into and, to some extent, share others’ suffering.” [Dalai Lama 1999: 123-124]

He also defines empathy as follow.

“I refer to the capacity we all have to empathize with one another, which, in Tibetan we call *shen dug ngal wa la mi so pa*⁷. Translated literally, this means ‘the inability to bear the sight of another’s suffering’. Given that this is what enables us to enter into, and to some extent participate, in other’s pain, it is one of our most significant characteristics.” [Dalai Lama 1999: 64]

In this definition by the Dalai Lama, we need to pay attention to the phrases “inability to bear” (*mi bzod pa*) and “another’s suffering” (*gzhan sdug bsngal ba*). As has been mentioned, “suffering” is the experience of consciousness, and implies a high degree of privacy. Therefore, we are unable to experience “another’s suffering.”

Despite this character of suffering, why is it that we are unable to bear another’s suffering? To consider this question, we need to examine the Dalai Lama’s explanation of the basis of compassion. He explains this with the following example.

If we see an animal suffering intensely, like a fish writhing with a hook in its mouth, we might spontaneously experience a feeling of not being able to bear its pain. That feeling isn’t based on a special connection with that particular animal, a feeling that the animal is my friend. In that case we are basing our compassion simply on the fact that that being also has feeling, and can feel pain. [Dalai Lama 1999(1998): 93] Therefore genuine compassion is based on the rational belief that all sentient beings have an innate desire to be happy and overcome suffering, just like oneself. And just as one does oneself, others have the natural right to fulfill this fundamental aspiration. On the basis of the recognition of this equality and commonality, we develop a sense of affinity and closeness with others. [Dalai Lama 1999(1998): 92]

This equality is called in Tibetan *bdag gzhan myam pa*⁸. This means “the equality of self and others.” The Dalai Lama comments on this concept on the bases of the words of Śāntideva(*zhi ba lha*). In *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (*byang chub sems pa’i spyod pa la ’jug pa*),

to the category of emotions which have a more developed cognitive component. Thus we can understand *snying rje* (compassion) in terms of a combination of empathy and reason. [Dalai lama 1999: 74]

⁷ *gzhan sdug bsngal ba la mi bzod pa/*

⁸ *bdag gzhan mnyam pa zer dus/ rang bde ba ’dod cing sdug bsngal mi ’dod pa de bzhin du/ nam mkha’i mthas gtugs pa’i sems can thams cad kyang bde ba ’dod dang sdug bsngal mi ’dod pa sgo kun nas mtshungs pa red ces ’di sgrub pa yin/* [Dalai Lama 2002(2000): 88]

Śāntideva says “One should first earnestly meditate on the equality of self and others. All equally experience suffering and happiness, and I must protect them as I do myself. Just as the body, which has many parts owing to its division into hands and so forth, should be protected as a whole, so should this entire world, which is differentiated and yet has the nature of the same suffering and happiness.”⁹ The Dalai Lama comments on this phrase as follows. “In the wish to gain happiness and to avoid suffering, self is the same as others. There is no difference between self and others as far as the right to achieve happiness and freedom from suffering is concerned.”¹⁰

This concept of equality seems to suggest not only equality in the sense of an innate desire to be happy and overcome suffering, but also the equality of the state in which both the self and others can overcome suffering¹¹. Therefore, as with the above example of a fish writhing on a hook, the difference in suffering between the self and others arouses compassion or the inability to bear the sight of another’s suffering.

About the next process, Śāntideva explains as follow.

“Labeled continuities and aggregates, such as strings of beads and armies, are deceptive; likewise, there is none who has the pain. Who is there to be oppressed by it? But if there is no subject suffering, there can be no difference in the pain of self and other. Simply, then, since pain is pain, I will dispel it. What use is there in making such distinctions?”¹² [Dalai Lama 1994: 102]

The Dalai Lama comments on this phrase as follows.

“When we talk about ‘I’ and ‘beings,’ these are not independent entities. They are false labels applied to a continuum of impermanent elements, just as ‘necklace’ is applied to a string of beads or ‘army’ to a collection of soldiers. However, if beings have no real

⁹ *bdag dang gzhan du mnyam pas ni// dang po nyid du 'bad de sgoms// bde dang sdug bsngal mnyam pas na// thams cad bdag bzhin bsrung bar bya// lag pa la sogs dbye ba rnam mang yang// yongs su bsrung ba'i lus su gcig pa ltar// de bzhin 'gro tha dad bde sdug dag// thams cad bdag bzhin bde ba 'dod mnyam gcig// ces gsungs/* [Śāntideva(zhi ba lha) 1985: *sde dge bstan 'gyur*, dbu ma, la, 27a2-27a3, CD-Rom, W23703-1421]

¹⁰ *de nas rang gzhan gnyis ka rang gi ngag gis bde ba 'dod pa dang rang gi ngag gis sdug bsngal mi 'dod pa gcig mtshungs/ sdug bsngal sel rgyu'i thob thang bde ba bsgrub rgyu'i thob thang yang khyad par med pa zhig la/ gang gis khyad par yod zer na/ rang nyid nig cig tu zad cing gzhan zer ba ni mtha' yas pas grangs kyi sgon nas gzhan gal che ba yin/* [Dalai Lama 2002(2000): 89]

¹¹ According to the Dalai Lama, because of the equality of self and others, just as we work our own benefit in order to gain happiness and protect ourselves from suffering, we should also work for the benefit of others, to help them attain happiness and freedom suffering. [Dalai Lama 1995: 85]

¹² *rgyud dang tshogs zhes bya ba ni// phreng ba dmag la sogs bzhin rdzun// sdug bsngal can gang de med pa// des 'di su zhig dbang bar 'gyur// sdug bsngal bdag po med par ni// thams cad bye brag med pa nyid// sdug bsngal yin phyir de bsal bya// nges pas 'dir ni ci zhig bya//* [Śāntideva(zhi ba lha) 1985: *sde dge bstan 'gyur*, dbu ma, la, 27b1-2, CD-Rom, W23703-1421]

existence, who is in pain? Why try to dispel suffering?” [Dalai Lama 1994: 103]

The explanation by Śāntideva is based on the logic of dependent origination (*rten cin 'brel bar 'byung ba*) like that the person is merely designated in dependence upon (*brten nas btags pa tsam*) the aggregates of mind and body. According to the Dalai Lama, this is the logic of the Middle Way Consequence School (*thal 'gyur ba*) [Dalai Lama 2005(1996): 258]¹³. Of course, the Dalai Lama stands on the Middle Way Consequence School. However, he does not always follow the logic of Śāntideva, and he continues to comment.

“Although the ‘I’ does not truly exist, in relative truth everyone wants to avoid suffering. This is sufficient reason for dispelling the sufferings of others as well as our own. What is the use in discriminating?” [Dalai Lama 1994: 103]

This opinion reflects his standpoint as a human being. When he emphasizes the need of compassion as ‘spirituality’ for people, he does not raise the Buddhist unique views.

Then, based on the Dalai Lama, how can we explain compassion without the logic of Śāntideva?

IV. Suffering as a gift

Here, we need pay attention to the relation between the self and others who are suffering. Others experience their own unique suffering. The self is unable to experience the unique suffering of others. The suffering of others creates the imbalance between the self and others with regard to the condition of suffering.

This character of suffering is similar to the gift at reciprocity, or reciprocal exchange, as is known in cultural anthropology.

Reciprocity is characterized by the existence of both a primary gift and a gift in return. To establish the nature of reciprocity, therefore, it is necessary to know what reasons exist for sending a gift in return. According to Marcel Mauss, an object possesses a spirit called *hau*. This spirit makes the object want to return to its original owner [Mauss 1990(1950): 11-12]. So, the receiver is impelled to give something in return by the spirit, *hau*. Such an explanation by Mauss suggests that the transfer of the spirit causes an imbalance between

¹³ *nang pa'i grub mtha' zab shos thal 'gyur ba ltar na/ gang zag de lus sems kyi phung po la brten nas btags pa tsam zhig yin zhing/ lus sems gnyis kyi nang nas kyang sems de phra ba dang rgyun ma chad par yod stabs/ nga'm gang zag de rnam shes kyi rgyun la brten nas btags pa tsam zhig tu bzhaq/* [Dalai Lama 2005(1996): 258]

donor and receiver, and that this imbalance puts the receiver under an obligation to give a gift in return in order to restore balance.

According to Maurice Godelier, the debt which is caused by receiving a gift creates an obligation to give in return. At this point, the primary motive for giving a counter-gift is to restore both the balance between the partners, and the equivalence of their status, or to cancel the debt. [Godelier 1999(1996): 93]

Hence, a primary gift has a role in creating an imbalance between partners, and a gift in return has a role in creating a balance. On the other hand, we can find something similar in compassion itself to the role of a primary gift and a gift in return in that compassion is very much intended to relieve suffering. Suffering of others corresponds to a primary gift, and the wish that sentient beings may be free from suffering correspond a gift in return.

According to the Dalai Lama, the character of compassion is the inability to bear the sight of another's suffering. Based on this principle, one can say that the self wishes sentient beings to be free from suffering as well as from the causes of suffering. The inability to bear suffering is caused by the imbalance which the suffering of others creates. In terms of reciprocity, the obligation of the receiver to give a gift in return is caused by the imbalance which the giving of the primary gift creates. The following table shows the correspondence between compassion and reciprocity.

Table	Something to cause imbalance	⇒	Something to impel	⇒	Something to restore balance
<u>Compassion</u> (As according to the 14th Dalai Lama)	Suffering	⇒	Inability to bear the sight of other's suffering	⇒	The wish that sentient beings may be free from suffering and the cause of suffering
<u>Reciprocity</u> (As according to cultural anthropology)	Primary gift	⇒	<i>Hau</i> Debt	⇒	Gift in return

V. Conclusion

As we have seen above, the Dalai Lama points out the feelings of loneliness and

alienation in the modern society can exist in a way that makes personal relations assume the character of relations between things. According to the Dalai Lama, to overcome feelings of loneliness and alienation and build connections to others, we need to have compassion: the wish for sentient beings to be free from both suffering and the causes of suffering. Thus, with regard to compassion, metaphorically speaking, suffering is a gift which can open up a connection with others. It is possible that by “receiving” others’ suffering, we can see others not as things or instrument, but as sentient beings, which have the capacity to experience pain and suffering.

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